

# The 2025 State of Advanced Course Access

## Book 1: The Access Mismatch



# A nation of aspiring students and a major “catch 22”

Access to challenging coursework should reflect students’ potential—not their ZIP code or background.

Let’s be honest—across the country, most high school students have aspirations and know what they want.

They want to go to college. They want to build a future. And they’re looking for ways to achieve those aspirations.

And a powerful path already exists.

Advanced coursework—like Advanced Placement (AP), Dual Enrollment, International Baccalaureate (IB), and Cambridge—can be a game-changer.

These classes challenge kids, build readiness and get kids started on postsecondary pathways.

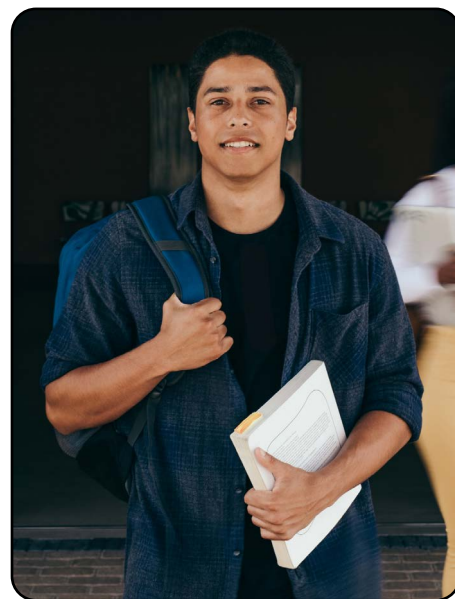
## The catch

But here’s the catch: a lot of students who have the aptitude and drive for advanced courses aren’t getting the chance.

At Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS), we work with middle and high schools across the country to change that. We help schools spot the gaps—often hidden in plain sight—and take action to ensure that all students, no matter their background, have a real shot at high-level learning.

This eBook is for leaders who want to better understand this problem and start making measurable progress using insights from nearly 275,000 students plus national research to show what works—and what doesn’t—when it comes to expanding access to advanced courses.

**There’s a lot at stake. But there’s also a real chance to get this right.**



# Table of contents

## CHAPTER 1

Advanced coursework delivers value, but access is uneven

## CHAPTER 2

When college dreams and classroom reality don't match

## CHAPTER 3

The state of advanced coursework access

## CHAPTER 4

Barriers that block the path

## CHAPTER 5

What educators need to boost student access.

## CHAPTER 6

Charting a path forward through policy, practice and partnerships

# Advanced coursework delivers value, but access is uneven

In schools across the country, a quiet story has been playing out.

Students are showing up with big ambitions, but too often, they're stuck in classes that don't reflect those goals. In a recent EOS survey of nearly 275,000 high school students told us:

**89%**

say they want to earn  
a college degree

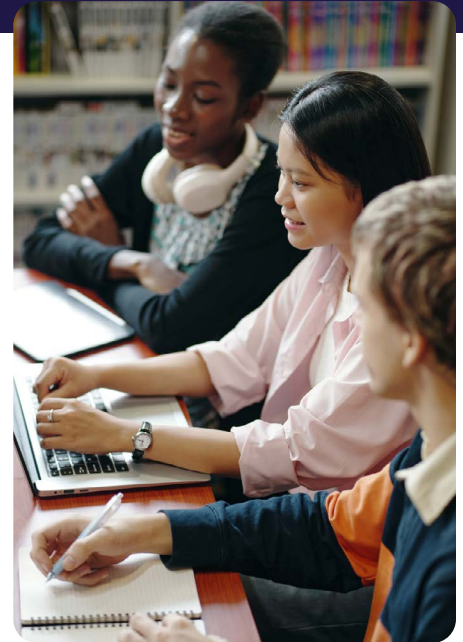


**Only 38%**

are enrolled in advanced courses like  
AP, IB, Dual Enrollment or Cambridge

And for middle school, just **26% get to take Algebra 1** before 9th grade, a major prerequisite to keep them on track for advanced courses later.

When middle and high school students complete rigorous college-level or college-prep classes before graduation, they unlock benefits beyond academics including:



**Financial savings:** Earning college credits in high school can reduce the overall cost of a degree by reducing the credits required for degree completion or allowing students to graduate from college earlier. Using NCES data on college credit costs, EOS determines that passing a single AP exam can save just over \$2500 in tuition at public colleges.

**Boosting preparedness:** Exposure to the rigor and expectations of college coursework helps ease the transition to higher education and consequently the likelihood of success.

**Increased confidence and maturity:** Successfully navigating challenging academic environments boosts self-confidence, promotes greater independence and responsibility and can lead students to take on additional advanced courses.

**Exploration of majors or careers:** Exposes students to potential fields of study that help them make more informed decisions about their college or post-secondary careers.

**Development of key skills** including critical thinking, time management, advanced research and independent study skills at an earlier age.



# Participation in advanced coursework

We know that when students take advanced courses, good things happen. Let's explore what's happening with 4 key programs.

## AP (Advanced Placement)

Around **35.7% of U.S. public high school graduates** took at least one AP exam in 2024 ([College Board, 2024](#)), making AP the most widely participated-in advanced program nationwide.

## Dual Enrollment (and Dual Credit)

One of the fastest growing programs supporting college and career readiness, particularly CTE. **89% of high schools now offer dual enrollment**, with about **16% of all public high school students participating** ([NACEP, 2023](#); [CCRC, 2023](#)).

## IB (International Baccalaureate)

IB participation is smaller in scale, with approximately **5% of public high schools offering IB programs** ([NCES, 2024](#)). Student-level participation rates are lower, estimated around **1–3% nationally** given the program's limited footprint.

## Cambridge AICE

Offered by about **200 schools nationally**, primarily in Florida, Cambridge AICE's student participation is **under 1% nationally**, but growing and known for strong college readiness outcomes ([Cambridge Blog, 2022](#)).

## Key takeaway for chapter 1



**89%** high school students surveyed by EOS want to earn a college degree, but only **38%** of students are enrolled in the advanced courses that serve as powerful college and career prep pathways.



# When college dreams and classroom reality mismatch

We've asserted that if you ask high school students what they want for their future, most of them won't hesitate.



They want to go to college.



They want meaningful careers.



They want to make a difference.

As previously shared, in our 2024–25 national survey of nearly 275,000 students, 89% said they want to earn a college degree. That number holds steady across all types of schools and student backgrounds. The aspiration is strong.

But when we asked whether their current classes are preparing them to reach that goal, the answers looked very different.

**89%**

of students said they want to earn a college degree



**Only 69%**

said their classes are preparing them well for college

That's a 20-point gap between students' goals and their day-to-day academic experience.

And here's where it gets more complicated: many educators aren't fully aware of just how high those aspirations are.

**Staff estimated that only 73% of students** want to go to college—much lower than the **89% who actually do**. That perception gap can influence everything from course recommendations to scheduling to student advising.

## Why this disconnect matters

When students feel their classes don't reflect their ambitions, it sets off a chain reaction—one that begins with disconnection and can end in disengagement.

**12%**

more likely to say their classes are challenging and relevant to their goals

**14%**

more likely to believe their classes will help them succeed in college

**12%**

more likely to say they'll feel like they belong when they get there

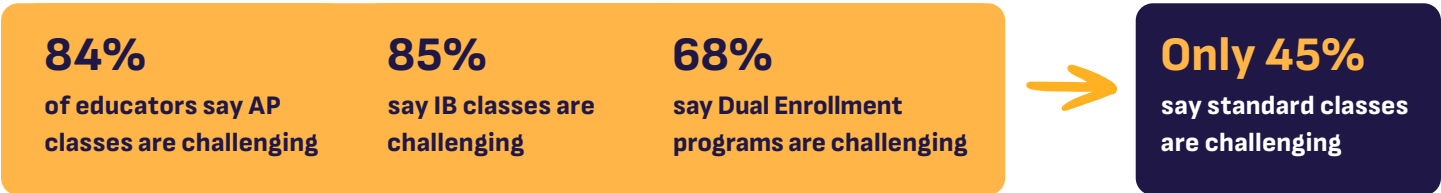
These aren't just abstract feelings, they're predictive indicators. Students who feel underchallenged or disengaged in high school are more likely to:

- **Miss school:** Students who report low academic relevance are up to **3x more likely** to be chronically absent ([Attendance Works, 2022](#)).
- **Lose momentum:** Disengagement correlates with significantly lower rates of on-time graduation ([NCES, 2021](#)).
- **Drop out:** Students who don't feel supported or challenged are at greater risk of leaving high school early, especially when combined with socioeconomic stressors ([Finn & Zimmer, 2012](#)).

These outcomes don't happen overnight. They build slowly—through years of being placed in courses that don't stretch students, match their interests, or reflect their postsecondary goals.

## Rigor and expectations aren't evenly distributed

Educators know academic rigor plays a huge role in college readiness. EOS school community surveys in 2024/25 included surveying over 16,500 teachers and counselors, and our findings showed that:



Despite the similar takeaways from staff and students on the challenge provided by standard classes, these classes remain the default for many students—especially those from historically under-resourced backgrounds.

This isn't about fault—it's about design. Educators are making decisions within complex structures, often without clear visibility into student interest, readiness, or potential.


**When staff underestimate student aspirations—as they did in our survey—it can lead to under-placement, missed opportunities, and gatekeeping.**

## The opportunity for district and school leaders

This is where district and school leaders can make a powerful difference. **When the ambition-reality gap is visible and understood, it becomes solvable.**

Every school already has students who are ready for more. The question is whether your systems recognize them, support them, and place them in courses that match their ambitions.

The good news? Most high schools already offer AP, IB, and Dual Enrollment. What's needed now is a sharper focus on participation—and on the students who are missing from those rosters.



### Key takeaway for chapter 2

We explored how a 20 point gap between aspiration and academic experience affects students, including the potential for disengagement that increases the risk of missing school, not graduating on time or other community risks.

# The state of advanced course access

So, we've explored that the dots connect between students participating in advanced courses and their ability to access significant benefits.

In our own EOS survey, we found that in addition to some of the benefits cited in chapter 1, advanced courses also boost feelings of belonging and confidence.



## Who's in the seats—and who's not.

With all these powerful benefits on offer, there's an elephant in the room.

The big issue is that these benefits land unevenly for students based on their backgrounds.

While advanced course programs deliver clear and measurable outcomes, students from higher income backgrounds or particular ethnicities enjoy access to advanced coursework at much higher rates than others.

While we're aware that in the national discourse it's currently debated whether differences in race should be a part of certain decisions in education, the data shows that **differences do exist** with respect to access and opportunity, particularly in relation to income and race.

With so many students who could benefit from advanced courses, and our nation having significant needs to fuel the workforce of the future, this is a huge opportunity for public school leaders.

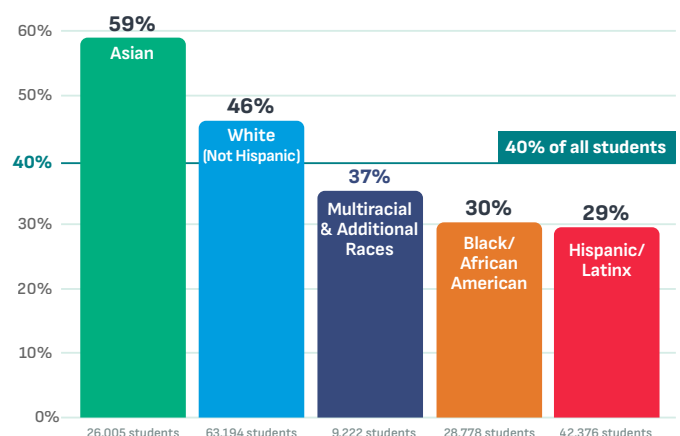
### Access based on race

**59% of Asian students** and **46% of White students** are enrolled in advanced courses, compared to **just 30% of Black/African American students** and **29% of Hispanic/Latinx students**.

### Access based on income

Students from lower-income backgrounds are **19% less likely** to be in advanced courses than their middle- and upper-income peers.

### Students participating in advanced courses





Those who are left out, miss out — on opportunities extending from college to life-long vocations. Studies show that students who complete college courses in high school or take advanced courses are more likely to:



Enroll in college



Skip remedial courses



Earn higher GPAs



Graduate faster than their peers

That’s a serious return on investment—for students and for school systems aiming to improve outcomes.  
(Data from [Center for American Progress](#), [College Board](#), [Dual Enrollment Impacts](#)).

## Offering the courses is just the beginning. Access is crucial.

Most high schools offer advanced coursework in some form. But simply offering the classes isn’t the same as making sure students know about them, feel invited to them and believe they belong in those classes.

For example, take the fast growing dual enrollment program.

**89% of high schools** now offer Dual Enrollment programs ([NACEP Fast Facts](#)).

But **urban and high-poverty schools** are far less likely to offer them than their suburban or rural counterparts.

Even when the courses are available, students from communities with historically **lower resources** participate at **lower rates**.

## It’s not just who’s missing. It’s why, and how to solve it.

### Knowledge is power, and the data informs outreach strategies

At EOS, we help districts answer a key question:

*Which students are ready for more, but haven’t been given the opportunity?*

In our experience working with hundreds of public schools, we’ve learnt that the school districts that have the most success in boosting access appreciate that they can’t use one size fits all strategies.

Once you know where the gaps are, it becomes a lot easier to do something about them.



### Key takeaway for chapter 3



We examined who is participating in advanced coursework and who isn’t, identifying disparities tied to income, race, and school type. We also emphasized the importance of using this knowledge to create differentiated strategies to improve access for all students.

# Barriers that block the path

In earlier chapters, we saw that the gap between student aspiration and opportunity isn't about ambition—it's about systems. In this chapter, we look closely at the real-world roadblocks that prevent students from moving forward, even when they're motivated and ready.

From our work with districts and our national surveys of high schoolers, we've identified three key barriers that disproportionately affect underserved students:

✗ **Lack of Adult Encouragement**

✗ **Lack of Information**

✗ **Lack of Belonging**



## Lack of Adult Encouragement

Far too many capable students simply aren't invited into advanced coursework, creating a phenomenon of gatekeeping that holds students and our country back from building the workforce we need. In our EOS survey:

**Only 30%**

students reported being encouraged by an adult at their school to take a more rigorous course



**Just 23%**

of students from lower-income backgrounds reported the same

A [study by Francis et al](#) found that counselors were significantly less likely to recommend equally qualified Black female students for advanced STEM courses like AP Calculus compared to White peers—even when academic readiness was identical.

## Why does this matter?

Encouragement is often the spark. Research shows that **students who receive even a single message of encouragement about college-level coursework are significantly more likely to enroll in AP or Dual Enrollment courses** (Nichols et al., 2021).

But encouragement is often filtered through adult assumptions. Educators may underestimate student potential based on past performance, test scores, or behavior—and those assumptions disproportionately affect students of color and low-income students ([Grissom et al., 2015](#)).

# Lack of Information

Even motivated students can't pursue opportunities they don't know exist.

**In our national data, 41% of students not enrolled in advanced coursework said they didn't understand what courses were available or how to sign up. Among students from lower-income households, that number rose to nearly 50%.**

Once again, this is a system design issue.

Access to information about AP, IB, Dual Enrollment, or AICE options is often fragmented and uneven. Key details may be buried in course catalogs, shared only in selective counseling sessions, or mentioned during parent nights that many families cannot attend.

A California study that examined disparities in AP outreach revealed that **schools serving more affluent communities were twice as likely to offer dedicated outreach about AP and Dual Enrollment** programs than schools serving low-income populations ([Marasco et al](#))

The result? **Many students, especially those who would benefit most, never get a clear invitation or roadmap into advanced coursework. The signal isn't sent. The door isn't opened.**

# Lack of Belonging

Even when students are invited and informed, they may not feel welcome.

In our EOS survey, **students from lower-income backgrounds were 7 percentage points more likely than their peers to say they felt out of place in advanced courses.**

That sense of exclusion can be subtle: a classroom culture that centers dominant norms, a curriculum that lacks representation, or a teacher who seems surprised to see a student enroll.

It can also be driven by prior exclusions, stereotypes, and a lack of representation that combine to fuel this sense of not belonging.

When students don't feel a sense of belonging, they disengage. A Finn & Zimmer study found that students who felt [disengaged and unsupported faced significantly higher dropout rates](#).

## Key takeaway for chapter 4



Lack of encouragement, lack of information, and lack of belonging are barriers to accessing advanced coursework. Each reflects a breakdown in systems meant to support students, but these problems are solvable by redesigning these outreach approaches with student experience at the center.

# What educators need to boost student access

So far, we've focused primarily on students and their aspirations, experiences, and obstacles. But we also know that across the country **educators care deeply about helping students succeed.**

Through our work with hundreds of schools and districts, we've learnt that many teachers, counselors and school leaders aren't always equipped with tools or training to act on what they know.

As we explored in chapter 2, educators see what's at stake with 84% saying AP courses are more academically rigorous than standard classes, 85% saying the same of IB and 68% for Dual Enrollment.

These stats compare to just 45% saying the same for standard classes, so teachers, counselors and school leaders understand the power of advanced courses to shape student success.

But that knowledge alone doesn't move systems, and these critical education players aren't always equipped with tools or training to act on what they know.



**84%**

say AP courses are more academically rigorous than standard classes.

**85%**

say the same of IB courses, and 68% for Dual Enrollment.

**Only 45%**

say the same for standard classes





# The gap between intent and implementation

Several key challenges emerged in our data and fieldwork:

## Unclear Identification Practices

Teachers and counselors often rely on visible markers—test scores, grades, or past behavior—to recommend students. But those signals can be biased or incomplete. Research shows that **teachers are less likely to refer students from marginalized groups to advanced classes, even when those students meet the academic criteria** ([Francis et al., 2020](#)).

## Inconsistent Training

Many educators haven't received specific training on how to recognize "hidden potential" or to challenge their own implicit biases. A 2020 RAND study found that only 22% of secondary teachers reported receiving professional development on tactics for more equal identification and placement for advanced courses ([RAND 2022](#)).

## Structural Silos

In most schools, course placement is the responsibility of a few, often just counselors or department heads. But expanding opportunity requires a team-wide approach. Teachers, coaches, administrators, and families all play a role in identifying and supporting potential.

## Lack of Time and Tools

Even when educators want to expand access, they may lack usable data or time. Less than half of teachers (46%) say they have access to the data they need to identify students who could succeed in advanced coursework but aren't currently enrolled ([Learning Heroes, 2023](#)).

## What educators need

To bridge the gap between understanding and action, educators need:

- ✓ **Clear, inclusive criteria** for identifying readiness beyond test scores.
- ✓ **Ongoing professional development** that builds skills in culturally responsive pedagogy and equity-centered advising.
- ✓ **Collaborative placement processes** that engage teachers, counselors, students, and families.
- ✓ **Data tools** that make hidden potential visible and actionable.

When educators are supported with tools, time, and training, they become powerful catalysts for change.

### Key takeaway for chapter 5



Educators believe in the value of rigorous coursework and want students to succeed. But too often, systemic gaps—like high caseloads, limited training, and subjective recommendation processes—get in the way.

# Charting a path forward through policy, practice and partnerships

Systemic problems require systemic solutions. Throughout this report, we've seen how aspiration outpaces access—but we've also seen what's possible when districts redesign systems to work for students.

Here, we explore three high-leverage strategies that district and state leaders can pursue to expand access and belonging in advanced coursework.



✓ **Policy That Expands Access**

✓ **Partnerships That Sustain Progress**

✓ **Practice That Identifies and Supports**

## Policy that expands access

At the state level, dozens of policies have been passed to reduce barriers to participation in advanced courses. Some examples include:

- **Illinois' Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act** removes barriers to Dual Credit and promotes early college coursework for underserved students.
- **Florida's AP Capstone access policy** increased participation among underrepresented students by removing eligibility hurdles.
- **Texas legislature** has codified a new funding model for community colleges that includes provisions that incentivize the completion of dual credit coursework and introduces mechanisms that cover dual credit costs for students from low-income backgrounds.

At the district level, policies that **automatically enroll qualified students, eliminate prerequisite gatekeeping, or require opt-out rather than opt-in enrollment** have led to measurable increases in participation across student groups as explored in [this article from Edtrust](#).

# Practice to identify and support students

Policy needs practice. At EOS our entire mission has focused on helping districts and schools implement practical methods to identify more students for advanced course enrollment support them once enrolled. From our experience, districts can:

- Use **data diagnostics** to find students who are academically ready but not yet enrolled.
- Design **inclusive master schedules** that don't isolate advanced courses or create conflicts.
- Build **support structures** like AP bridge programs, summer boot camps, and peer mentorship models.
- **Develop training and guidance to teaching staff and counselors** to help them better identify and support students, increasing the **effectiveness of trusted adults** in the buildings.

In one EOS partner district, a single-semester initiative that re-identified underrepresented students and redesigned the master schedule led to a **54% increase** in Black and Latino student AP enrollment, while Dallas ISD's 2019 opt-out policy more than doubled Black & Hispanic participation in Algebra 1 tracking.

## Partnerships that sustain progress

Districts don't have to do this alone.

The most durable progress often comes through cross-sector collaboration—with organizations like Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS), NACEP, and other higher education institutions ready to collaborate in providing the tools, training, and infrastructure to expand opportunity at scale.

- **Professional development:** Educators need support to recognize and nurture untapped student talent. Targeted training—especially when tied to student-level data—has been shown to improve teacher effectiveness and equity in access decisions ([Darling-Hammond et al., 2017](#)).
- **Data and student voice tools:** This is an area that EOS knows well, as we've found that platforms that surface real-time student and broader community insights are invaluable for districts and educators that want to make better decisions to identify capable students.
- **College partnerships:** Strong dual enrollment programs depend on alignment between high schools and postsecondary institutions. When districts partner with colleges to ensure credit transfer, course quality, and advising, students are more likely to earn college credit and stay on track ([NACEP, 2021](#)).

A focused approach to strategic partnerships ultimately helps districts move beyond one-time initiatives toward lasting, systemic change.



### Key takeaway for chapter 6

District and state leaders can expand access to advanced coursework through policy changes, redesigned practices, and powerful partnerships. When systems change, outcomes follow. These aren't one-off initiatives, they're long-term levers that can align ambition with opportunity.

## CONCLUSION

# A call to leaders

### **We began this publication with a simple truth: students are not lacking in ambition.**

From city schools to rural districts, the desire for higher education and meaningful futures is nearly universal.

However, too many systems haven't caught up with those dreams.

Over the last six chapters, we've seen how advanced coursework can be transformative—boosting confidence, improving college readiness, and opening doors to greater opportunity. We've also uncovered the barriers that still stand in the way: students who go uninvited, educators who lack the time or tools, and systems that weren't built to include everyone.

But here's the good news:

District leaders have the power to change outcomes—not just for individual students, but for entire communities. It starts with recognizing that potential is everywhere, and that the job of a school system is to make opportunity equally available.

District leaders have the power to change outcomes—not just for individual students, but for entire communities. It starts with recognizing that potential is everywhere, and that the job of a school system is to make opportunity equally available.

That means:

- ✓ Using data to spot and close participation gaps
- ✓ Equipping educators with tools to see hidden talent
- ✓ Removing gatekeeping practices from advanced course placement
- ✓ Designing systems that center student experience, not just policy compliance

**These are not abstract reforms. They're practical, proven steps that can begin now.**

### **At Equal Opportunity Schools, we've helped districts across the country do exactly that—by integrating data, student voice, and leadership strategy into day-to-day practice, so we know it's possible.**

Even against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting education landscape, the opportunity to increase access to advanced coursework remains one of the most powerful—and actionable—levers for improving our nation's talent pipeline while also improving student outcomes and strengthening communities.

#### Additional Resources

- [Blog](#)
- [Solutions](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Guides & Reports](#)
- [Webinars](#)





**[eoschools.org](https://eoschools.org)**

